Muslim Women as Religious Scholars: A Historical Survey

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Abstract: This paper is concerned with the role and general impact of women's scholarship in the arena of religious sciences. I provide a concise overview of the foundational sources of Islamic knowledge followed by an overview of women's engagement therein. I then examine ʿĀʾisha's commentaries which seek to correct particular narrations by the Prophet's companions, and I argue that ʿĀʾisha's methodological contribution is a potential model for how to engage ḥadīth holistically in the light of the Qurʾānic message and objectives. I conclude by stressing that women's concerted participation within the realm of religious scholarship is essential for enhancing religious scholarship in general and for advancing the role and status of women in spheres where Islamic knowledge is applied.

Introduction

Since the inception of the Islamic community in the earliest decades of the seventh century, women have been taking a prominent role in the cultivation and preservation and cultivation of the main sources of Islamic knowledge, i.e. the Qurʾān, and sunna. This legacy of women's scholarly activism was later suppressed and weakened, but never entirely extinguished. Through an analysis of women's contributions to the realm of religious sciences, this paper argues for the need for increased women's engagement with the foundational sources of Islamic scholarship. I argue that just as women's voices and intimate engagement with the religious sciences were vibrant and influential in the nascent Muslim community, women scholars of the present should follow the footsteps of their foremothers. Women's concerted participation within the realm of religious scholarship is essential for enhancing religious scholarship in general and for advancing the role and status of women in spheres where Islamic knowledge is applied.

My essay begins a concise overview of the foundational sources of Islamic knowledge, followed by an overview of women's engagement therein. Here, I call attention to the early vigor

[1] In the preparation of this essay for publication I am grateful to my research assistant Celene Ayat Lizzio.

and subsequent decline of women's contributions to the religious sciences and I suggest that a strong methodology based on the Qurʾān and sunna is one tool in reasserting women's scholarship and reshaping religious discourse. I then devote special attention to ʿĀʾisha's efforts to correct misogynistic attitudes that were propagated by some people on women's roles in the society.[2] I argue that ʿĀʾisha's methodological contribution is a model for how to engage ḥadīth holistically in the light of the Qurʾānic message and objectives. I stress the contemporary role and import of women's engagement in the tradition of interpretation and in the development of religious fields of knowledge.

The importance of women's engagement with the foundational sources

Religious scholarship in Islam is based on several primary sources including the Qurʾān and the collected *sunna* of the Prophet Muhammad which clarifies and expands upon Qurʾānic teachings.[3] Muslims regard the Qurʾān as the ultimate reference for human affairs and believe it to be safeguard by God from distortion.[4] The Qurʾān regards the Prophet as a role model for humanity (e.g. Qurʾān 33:21), and hence, from the perspective of Islamic jurisprudence, the authentic prophetic sunna explains, clarifies, and demonstrates how to implement the teachings of the Qurʾān. The sunna has a range of different hermeneutic functions vis-à-vis the Qurʾān. For instance, jurists regularly discuss and deliberate how a particular *ḥadīth*, a reported saying or

[2] ʿĀʾisha is the daughter of the first Caliph Abū Bakr ʿAbdullāh bin Abī Quḥāfah (c. 573 – 634 CE). She was characterized by a sharp intelligence and was the source of more than twelve-hundred ḥadīth reports. For an account of her life and role in the tradition see Dennis Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of A'isha Bint Abi Bakr* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

[3] With occasional adaptation where noted, this study relies primarily on M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation*. 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Ḥadīth are translated by the author from Ḥadīth Encyclopedia CD-ROM (*Muwsūʾah al-ḥadīth al-sharīf*), edition 2.1 (Cairo: Harf Information Technology, 2000).

[4] See for instance Q. 15:9. While I am addressing here on the role of the Qurʾān in deriving legal theory and principles, the Qurʾān describes itself with at least thirty-four attributes including *hudā* (guidance) and *dhikr* (remembrance); the role that the Qurʾān plays in Muslim life and devotion is multi-fold; for a thorough and skillful treatment of this topic see Ingrid Mattson, *The Story of the Qur'an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2008.

action attributed to the Prophet, relates to the text of the Qurʾān. First, each ḥadīth is evaluated for authenticity on a sliding scale based on the content and the character and reliability of the chain of narrators. Then, if the content of a reported ḥadīth has no apparent relation to the Qurʾān, jurists may accept it as a part of the body of religious law on the condition that it does not directly contradict a more firmly established principle. Furthermore, the reported action could be general and apply broadly, or it could be a matter that specifically pertained only to the Prophet Muḥammad due to his exhausted status as a prophet. Jurists also deliberate whether the action represents simply a custom particular to the time period and geographic local, in which case it is not necessarily religiously binding on Muslims at large, or whether a given tradition represents a more fundamental religious principle that should be religiously binding. This is merely a simplistic rendering of a complex body of legal theory on the relation between Qurʾān and sunna. A vast array of individual ḥadīth reports comprises the corpus of sunna, and this corpus differs across sects, schools of thought, and geographic locals.[5]

Across all trends of thought, the underlying esteem for the Prophet is fundamental; he is regarded as model for conduct to be aspired to by Muslims. The Prophet was a religious teacher, a moral guide, a statesman, a social reformer, and a committed family member; all of these roles were in the reception and subsequent perception of his prophecy and traditions.[6] In particular, the role of the women in his household is highly significant, and these women enjoyed exclusive access to intimate knowledge about the Prophet, including information about many of the situations that he faced in his public life as well as in his more private affairs. The critical engagement of these women is exemplary. Upon examination, the Qurʾān and sunna exemplify the enormous role that the female companions and family of the Prophet had on Islamic

[5] See Jonathan Brown, *Ḥadīth: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Banbury: Oneworld, 2009), 150-183.
[6] See Roy Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001).

scholarship by broadening the religious knowledge. The Qurʾān notes this distinguished place occupied by the women in the Prophet's household and designates the title *Ummahāt al-muʾminīn* for the wives of Prophet Muhammad.[7] Indeed, the Qurʾān specifically instructs the women of the household of the Prophet:

> Remember [and proclaim] what is recited in your houses of God's revelations and wisdom (*wa athkurna mā yutlā fī buyūtikunna min ayāti allah*) for God is all subtle, all aware (*wa al-ḥikma inna allah kāna laṭīfan khabīran*) (Q. 33:34)

Here, A. Yusuf Ali in his translation of this verse explains that the verb *adhkurna* takes the wives of the Prophet as its subject and means not only remember, but "recite, read, make known, and publish the message."[8] This verse quoted above is directly following a strong confirmation of the equal merit of men and women who are submissive to God (*al-muslimīna wa al-muslimāt*):

> Truly, submissive men and submissive women, believing men and believing women, obedient men and obedient women, truthful men and truthful women, steadfast men and steadfast women, humble men and humble women, charitable men and charitable women, fasting men and fasting women, the men who guard their private parts and the women who guard, and the men who remember God often and the women who remember—God has prepared for them forgiveness and a rich reward" (Q. 33:35).

The verses mentioned above serve to illustrate the responsibility that God bestowed upon the women of the Prophet's household as well as the equal plane upon which God placed men and women of Muslim character.

The role of women in the preservation of the message of Islam did not merely remain a Qurʾānic commandment, but according to the earliest Muslim historiography, women had a dynamic role in the initial preservation of the Qurʾān. For instance, an original handwritten copy of the Qurʾān, out of which all subsequent copies were made during the first Caliphate, was said to be under the preservation and trust of Ḥafṣa bint ʿUmar (d. c. 656 AD), the daughter of the

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[7] The title is evocative of characteristics such as love, care, intuition, and wisdom. For an account of the role and the involvement of the *Ummahāt al-muʾminīn* in the recording and reciting of the Qurʾān see ʿĀʾishah ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, *Tarājim sayyidāt bayt al-nubbuwa* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1984), 25.

[8] Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an,* 11th ed. (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 2004), 1067.

second Caliphʿ Umar ibn al-Khattāb (d. 644 AD) who married the Prophet shortly after her first husband was killed in the battle of Uḥud (3/ 625). According to traditional accounts, women did not simply safeguard the physical copies of the early Qurʾān but also had an active role in its transmission and interpretation, as will be elaborated below. While Sunni authors tend to concentrate on ʿĀʾisha and Shiʾi literature focuses on Fāṭima (d. 632 AD, the daughter of the Prophet's first wife Khadīja and the only child of the Prophet to have survived to adulthood), the women in the prophet's household contributed greatly to the development of Islamic scholarship, alongside the contributions of many other women in the early Muslim community.

Muslim societies throughout history were not static, but in fact were very dynamic, with regard to woman's status. The era, location, political climate, economic factors, regional customs, and local traditions contribute greatly to the expectation, roles, and opportunities for women. Each country, region, city and even village has its own features. Women status, civic roles, and political engagements vary greatly from one place to another, even within the same time period. Throughout more than fourteen centuries of Islamic history, diversity and plurality have been the main characteristics of Islamic culture and society. Hence, it is difficult to determine exact reasons for overall dearth of women's engagements in religious scholarship in Muslim societies at large. Less than three decades after the Prophet's death, new of concepts and ideals were introduced into the social fabric of the early Muslim society. Particularly as the empire of the early Muslim's grew and became increasingly urban, Islamic values were put to the test by conflicting tribal and authoritarian forces. As the Caliphate took on dynastic tendencies, submission to the ruler was often deliberately equated with submission to God, and as a result, protest against political oppression was conflated with so-called chaos-inducing rebellion. In theological discourse, concepts of fate were emphasized over those of human

freedom. Women, for the most part, lost the esteemed public roles they had gained under the Prophet and his immediate successors, and by and large, an older, deep-rooted ideal of women as inferior and gained greater staying-power within religious discourses and society at large.[9] While women were able still able to exert influence, particularly through their male kin, on the whole women's contributions to public life were drastically curbed, and their epistemic authority regularly regarded as secondary to that of men.[10] As discussed below, the derivation of religious law and trends in exegesis often further inscribed women's perceived inferiority.

In order to illustrate these general dynamics with specific examples, I examine below women's role and contributions to specific fields of Islamic knowledge, namely exegesis (*tafsīr*), ḥadīth scholarship, and jurisprudence (*fiqh*). I then propose means and methodologies relevant to advancing women's contemporary engagement with the tradition by putting forward the example of ʿĀʾisha. In my discussion I draw upon early textual sources, including the Qurʾān, ḥadīth collections, biographies of the Prophet (*al-sīra al-nabawiyya*),[11] political histories of the early Muslims (*al-ṭabaqāt*),[12] biographies of prominent Muslim scholars,[13] the tradition of jurisprudence (*fiqh*),[14] and Muslim literary culture more generally.

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[9] See the arguments of Mona M. Abul-Fadl, "Revisiting the Muslim Woman Question: An Islamic Perspective," adapted from *Muslim Women Scholars on Women in Islam*, symposium hosted by Chicago Theological Seminary, November, 7th 1990, accessed June 1, 2011, http://muslimwomenstudies.com/WomRevisit.htm.

[10] As discussed in detail in Ahmed Ragab, "Epistemic Authority of Women in the Medieval Middle East," *Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World* 8, no. 2 (2010): 181-216.

[11] For a discussion of Muslim sacred texts as a source of the social history of women see Ragab, 182-5.

[12] There are a vast number of biographical compendia that document and gather data regarding events, battles, wars, cities, rulers, and influential people. They represent a rich source for discerning women's history for contemporary authors. For example, ʿAbd Halīm Abū Shuqqa, has fairly recently sought to present a comprehensive account of the status of women in the early Muslim community in six volumes entitled *Taḥrīr at marʾa fī ʿaṣr al-risālah*, (Kuwait: Dār al-Qalam, 1990).

[13] Muslim historians began collecting biographies of prominent scholars in the second century of the Islamic era; many collections were limited to a specific school of thought. Overall, entries on women were significantly less compared to those of men and exceedingly rare in the collections limited to particular schools of thought; see Ruth Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Saʿd to Who's who* (Boulder: L. Rienner Publishers, 1994).

[14] For an overview of the legal tradition as a source of women's history see, Judith E. Tucker, "'And God Knows Best': The Fatwa as a Source for the History of Gender in the Arab World," in *Beyond the Exotic: Women's Histories in Islamic Societies*, Amira El Azhary Sonbol, ed. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 168-179).

Women and the tradition of exegesis

Exegesis (*tafsīr)* is a field of Islamic scholarship that is impacted by the pre-conceived societal perceptions of women just as much as it can be seen as impacting women's role and status. Methodological trends in classical exegesis fall into at least two categories. The first trend, known as *tafsīr bil-maʾthūr* (lit. exegesis by adage), employs the Prophet's words and actions as the framework for textual engagement. In the second trend, known as *tafsīr bil-raʾī* (lit. exegesis by opinion), interpretation is based on rational analysis of a variety of sources. The exegesis of Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) is considered the backbone of the first school.[15] Ṭabarī's exegesis collected many traditions that entered the Islamic textual traditions through Biblical origins, including traditions that involved women.[16] Throughout his commentary, Ṭabarī records adages simply to express doubts about the veracity of its origins, yet later generations of scholars would quote and incorporate the particular adage as part of the body of authoritative knowledge. Barbara Freyer Stowassar sexamine the impact of later commentators imparting their biases by drawing on themes of women's defective nature and inherent threat to the social order, and highlights how pre-Islamic traditions, among other factors, provided a repertoire of adages of women as devious, unchaste, and deceitful.[17] She observes that: "medieval Islamic society was patriarchal to a far higher degree than had been the early Islamic community in Mecca and Medina, first recipient of the Qurʾān's revelations."[18]

However, beginning in the eighteenth century, a different scriptural canon on women gradually began to emerge, driven by a retrieval of exegesis based on reading the Qurʾān intra-

[15] Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl al-Qur'ān* (Reprinted Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1985).
[16] Barbara Freyer Stowassar, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 23.
[17] Stowassar, 23-5.
[18] Ibid., 21.

textually (*tafsīr al-Qurʾān bil-Qurʾān*, lit. interpreting the Qurʾān through the Qurʾān). This trend in exegesis called for a critical examination of the extra-textual material that had been previously drawn into the fold of Qurʾānic interpretation. It also emphasized more emphatically the understanding that passages in the Qurʾān illuminated other passages, and that this hermeneutic strategy took precedent over all others. Women participated actively in that reform movement; for example, ʿĀʾisha ʿAbd al-Raḥmān (1913-1998), a professor of Arabic literature at the University College for Women at Ain Shams University in Cairo, wrote a Qurʾānic exegesis under the alias Bint al-Shāṭiʾ which was based on this concept of holistic, intra-textual interpretation.[19]

In the later decades of the twentieth century, Muslim women's religious scholarship begun to raise difficult methodological questions in the service of building a critical and insightful hermeneutic repertoire to the foundational sources: Who possesses the authority to interpret the Qurʾān? What are the limits of Qurʾānic interpretation? When there is a multiplicity of interpretations, how is the best interpretation to be determined? How should changes in social expectations and mores be taken to bear in interpretative strategies? How can women re-approach the Qurʾān with renewed vigor and confidence? Is there a "woman's reading" that might substantively differ from a 'man's reading' of a given verse? Engaging with these types of exegetical questions became a foundation for women's religious scholarship. Notably, in the early 1990s Amina Wadud greatly advanced this line of inquiry with the first edition of her book *Qur'an and Woman.*[20] Azizah al-Hibri, Nimat Barazanji, Laleh Bakhatiar, Asma Barlas, Laury Silvers, and others have also focused on developing hermeneutic strategies for contemporary

[19] ʿĀʾisha Abd al-Raḥmān Bint al-Shatiʾ, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī lil-Qurʾān al-karīm.* 3rd edition, Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1968.

[20] 1st edition 1992, subsequent editions include Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Fajar Bakti, 1994 and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

exegesis. The work of these scholars continues to influence newer generations of women who are building upon this foundation.

Women and the transmission of ḥadīth

Women participated greatly in the establishment of ḥadīth sciences, and women ḥadīth transmitters were noted to be particularly trustworthy. According to the renowned ḥadīth scholar Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), there were many men who fabricated ḥadīth; however, no woman was ever accused of fabrication.[21] Indeed, ḥadīth scholarship was an area of religious knowledge where early Muslim women flourished.[22] Fāṭima b. Ibrāhīm Maḥmmūd Ibn Jawhar (d. c. 1300) is one illustration; a renowned teacher of some of the most prominent ḥadīth scholars of her time, her reputation was such that when she came to Madina for pilgrimage, at the local students' bequest she taught in the mosque of the Prophet and signed licenses (*ijāza)* to transmit her narrations.[23] Another example is Zaynab bint al-Shaʿrī (d. c. 614/1218) who studied ḥadīth under important scholars and in turn taught many reputable students including Ibn Khallikān (d. 681/1282).[24] Despite some notable examples, women in ḥadīth scholarship never reached par with men in terms of numbers of their numbers. From its heyday among the early generations of women, this tradition of women's ḥadīth scholarship seems to have dwindled; all the while ḥadīth literature is frequently evoked in order to suppress the role, rights, and status of women.[25] Writing against this trend, the recent work of Sa'diyya Shaikh has analyzed several prominent

[21] Abū ʿAbd Allah Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī, *Siyar ʿAʾlam al-nublāʾ,* vol. 23 (Beirut: Dār al-Risāla, n.d.), 119; see also the full discussion on 119- 23.
[22] With regard to their role in transmitting ḥadīth, Muhammad Zubayr Siddiqi notes that: "There is simply no parallel to this special and valuable role played by women scholars in the development, preservation and dissemination of Islamic knowledge," in *Ḥadīth Literature: Its Origin, Development, Special Features & Criticism* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 117.
[23] Ibid., 127.
[24] Muḥammad Akram Nadwī, *Al-Muḥaddithāt: The Women Scholars in Islam* (Oxford: Interface Publications, 2007).
[25] The reasons for this decline remain an open era for further scholarship. See related discussions in 'Umr R. Khālah, *ʿAlām al-nisāʾ fī ʿalām al-ʿArab wa al-Islām,* vol. 1, (Beirut: Mu'sasāt al-Risāla, 1978), 357-358; see also Siddiqi, 122.

ḥadīth from a Muslim feminist lens, therein providing strategies for engaging with the tradition in ways that highlight women's strengths, assets, and potentials.[26]

Women and the legacy of fiqh

The urbanization and growth of the bureaucratic and intellectual elite in the eighth through twelfth centuries brought the advent of institutionalized schools of legal thought (s. *madhhab*, plur. *madhāhib*). In an effort to systematize the derivation of religious law, a body of knowledge referred to as *fiqh* (lit. comprehension) developed in cultural centers in response to local cultural, social, political, and judicial needs. *Fiqh* is the effort of humans to understand and interpret the Divine scripture, and then to integrate this understanding into the social fabric, civic institutions, and daily life. The term *fiqh* also refers to the vast collection of opinions on the law given across centuries and schools of thought.[27] As the body of fiqh developed in theoretical sophistication, Muslim scholars advanced various frameworks to comprehend the teachings of the Qurʾān and sunna vis-à-vis *al-wāqiʿ*, a term which in Muslim legal theory refers to the social and material realities of society.[28] Thus, the theoretical grounding of religious law was seen to be responsive to social realities. In fact, the law took shape vis-à-vis practical, theoretical, and ideological concerns, and included in its scope factors such as experience, custom, precedent, and public

[26] Saʻdiyya Shaikh, "Knowledge, Women and Gender in the Hadith: A Feminist Interpretation," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 15 no. 1 (2004): 99-108.
[27] See Jasser Auda, *Maqasid Al-Shariah as Philosophy of Islamic Law: A Systems Approach* (London; Washington: The International institute of Islamic Thought, 2008), pxxvii.
[28] For detailed discussions see Taha Jabir Al Alwani, *Source Methodology in Islamic Jurisprudence: Usul al-Fiqh al-Islami*, 3rd ed., Yusuf Talal DeLorenzo and Anas S. Al Shaikh-Ali trans. (Herndon. VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2003).

interest.[29] The classical methodology for determining religious law allows for a plurality of opinions among qualified experts.[30]

While their roles may be lesser-known and lesser-celebrated, women have been legal scholars and have played important roles as legal experts and consultants. For example, a woman mufti is said to have contributed extensively to the establishment of Ḥanbalī legal thought through her documentation of the teachings of Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855).[31] In Qayrawan (present day Tunisia), mufti Khadīja bint Saḥnūn (d. 270/883 or 4) taught Mālikī jurisprudence, and she reports that her father, Saḥnūn b. Saʿīd al-Tanūkhī (d. 240/854 or 5), one of the most important jurists of his time, used to regularly consult her for advice on issuing opinions.[32] Faṭīma al-Samarqandīya (d. 578/1182 or 3), was a renowned Ḥanafī mufti, and before her marriage to ʿAlā al-Dīn Abū Bakr Ibn Masʿaūd al-Kāsāsnī (d. 587/1191),[33] legal edicts used to be signed jointly with her father ʿAlā al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Samarqandī (d. c. 538/1144). Later, the legal edicts were signed by all three, Faṭīma, her father, and her husband.[34] Al-Imām Abū al-Qāsim ʿAbd al-Karīm ibn Muḥammad al-Rāfiʿī (d. 623/1226) a Shāfiʿī scholar,[35] is reported to have studied with his grandmother Zulaykha bint Ismāʾl b. Yūsuf al-Shāfiʿī, a mufti at the time.[36] Despite these examples and other noteworthy individuals, the tradition of legal scholarship as a whole is characterized by a dearth of women's

[29] For an overview of the development of the law see Bernard G. Weiss, *The Spirit of Islamic Law* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1998).
[30] John L. Esposito, *Women in Muslim Family Law* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 51.
[31] Khālah, vol. 1, 138.
[32] Ibid., 332-333.
[33] Ibn al-ʿAdīm, Kamal al-Dīn. *Bughyat al-ṭalab fī tārīkh ḥalab,* vol. 10 (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.) 4346-7.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibn Mulaqqin Sirāj al-Dīn al-Shāfiʿī, 25.
[36] Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī and Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, *Ḥusn al-muḥāḍara fi tārīkh Miṣr wa-al-Qāhira, v*ol. 1 (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-ʿArabī, 1998), 343. For a mention of subsequent women muftis in Egypt see Amira El Azhary Sonbol, ed. *Women, the Family, and Divorce Laws in Islamic History*, Amira El Azhary Sonbol (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996) 7-8; see also Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, *Egypt's Liberal Experiment, 1922-1936* (Berkley: University of California Press,1977), 39-51.

voices. This lack of women's representation has deeply affected women's legal rights in many areas such as marriage, divorce, inheritance and other financial and commercial rights.[37] At present, women scholars are gaining modest ground as councils made entirely of male legal scholars are very gradually making moves to include at least one female legal scholar, often to work specifically in the area of "women's issues", i.e. matters of female hygiene and some areas of family law.[38]

ʿĀʾisha: Reclaiming a Tradition of Women's Engagement

In this segment, I argue that the legacy of ʿĀʾisha is replete with methodological premises for enhancing women's portrayal in the religious tradition and for promoting women's engagement with the primary religious sources. Analyses of the critical methodology of ʿĀʾisha are not without precedent, and at least three classical Sunni scholars have previously sought to develop this field of study: Abū Manṣūr ʿAbd al-Muḥsīn bin Muḥammad bin ʿAli al-Baghdādī (d. 489/1095 or 6), was the first to compile about twenty-five sayings attributed to the Prophet by his Companions which ʿĀʾisha had revised in a volume entitled: "*al-Ijāba fīmā istadrkat ʿĀʾisha ʿalā al-Ṣaḥāba"* (The Answer to what ʿĀʾisha Revised on the Companions); subsequently, Muḥmmad ibn ʿAbd Allāh Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1370), a prominent scholar of ḥadīth and Qurʾānic sciences, composed a commentary on al-Baghdādī's examples[39]; and finally, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, (d. 910/1505), composed another commentary on this material which had come

[37] For a thorough discussion of this topic see Shaymāʾ al-Sarrāf, *Aḥkām al-marʾa bayna al-ijtihād wa-al-taqlīd: dirāsa muqārana fī al-sharīʿa wa-al-fiqh wa-al-qānūn wa-al-ijtimāʿ* (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Intishār al-ʿArabī, 2008).
[38] E.g. "Women Welcome Female Muftis in Syria," *Middle East Online*, March 7, 2008, accessed June 1, 2011, http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=26721.
[39] Muḥmmad ibn ʿAbd Allāh Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī, *al-Ijāba lil-īrād mā istadrkathu ʿĀʾishah ʿalā al-Ṣaḥāba*, Saʿīd al-Afghānī ed. (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1980).

to be known as *istidrākāt ʿĀʾisha*, (ʿĀʾisha's revisions).[40] While few in number, these works confirm what is pointed out by contemporary Muslim feminist authors,[41] namely that ʿĀʾisha had a clear conception of how to derive understandings from the Qurʾān and sunna of the Prophet. Her strategies for laying claim to religious authority and firmly refuting misogyny serve as examples of how women can and should bring their critical perspectives to the constitution of religious knowledge.

ʿĀʾisha made the Qurʾānic teachings and Prophetic sunna the solid basis from which she launched her dissenting opinions.

For instance, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855) narrated the following in his *Musnad*:

> Two men entered ʿĀʾisha's house and said: "We heard Abū Hurayra saying that the Prophet used to say, 'affliction resides in women, donkeys and homes.' ʿĀʾisha was markedly disturbed by that and said: "I swear by He who revealed the Qurʾān upon *Abū-Al-Ghāssim* [Mohamed] that he did not speak like this. Rather the Prophet of God said, 'The people used to say during the *Jāhilīya* [pre-Islamic era] women, animals used for transportation, and home bring bad omen.'[42]

To this, ʿĀʾisha recited the verse:

> No calamity befalls on earth or in yourselves but it is inscribed in the Book of Decrees before we bring it into existence. Verily, that is easy for Allah. In order that you may not grieve at the things that you fail to get nor rejoice over that which has been given to you. And Allah likes not prideful boaster (Q. 57: 22-23).

In this example, it was clear for ʿĀʾisha that the Qurʾānic worldview denounced superstition (e.g. Q. 27:45-47, 36:18, and 7:131), and therefore, an accurate ḥadīth could not contradict the Qurʾānic worldview. In commenting on this exchange, al-Zarkashī highlights the subsequent wide acceptance of ʿĀʾisha's reasoning among scholars.

In another example, ʿĀʾisha refuted a narration by evoking the sunna of the Prophet. In this ḥadīth, narrated by Abū Hurayra, the Prophet is said to have reportedly cautioned against

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[40] Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *ʿIyn al-iṣāba fī istadrāk ʿĀʾisha ʿalā al-Ṣaḥāba*, ʿAbd Allāh Muḥmmad al-Darwīsh, ed. (Maktaba al-ʿAlim al-Qāhira, 1409/1988).
[41] On ʿĀʾisha's skill in refuting misogynistic ḥadīth see Shaikh, 105-6 and Naguib, 42.
[42] Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, in Ḥadīth EncyclopediaCD-ROM, ḥadīth # 24894.

three mishaps, the occurrence of which could invalidate a person's prayer. These included the passing by of a woman, a beast of burden, or a black dog. To this, ʿĀʾisha exclaimed:

> Would you equate us with beasts and hounds! By God, the Messenger of Allah used to go about his *ṣalāt* [prayer] as I was stretched on the bed between him and the *qibla* [the direction of prayer]. I felt I needed to go to the restroom and did not want to stay there and cause distraction to the Messenger of God, so I quietly sneaked between his feet.[43]

In forcefully refuting the misunderstanding of the ḥadīth and respectfully challenged and explained her view. ʿĀʾisha was fending for the integrity of the teachings of the Prophet.

ʿĀʾisha spent over three decades after the prophet's death, honoring a legacy by transmitting knowledge, explaining and interpreting, and correcting misperceptions. She was the source of one thousand two hundred and ten ḥadīth narrations of the Prophet, one hundred and seventy four of which were authenticated in two of the most prominent ḥadīth collections *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Muslim*.[44] Her traditions were transmitted by a great number of the Prophet's companions and followers.[45] In her analyses and criticisms of the various ḥadīth narratives, and in her debates with a number of the Prophet's companions, ʿĀʾisha countered claims insinuating that women were inferior in either religion or intellect. She stressed the importance of narrating ḥadīth in their entirety, in the context in which they were uttered, and verbatim. In her opinion, it was not acceptable to only convey the meaning of the ḥadīth, as the meaning was a matter of interpretation and could be modified as a result of the narrator's limited memory or level of understanding. For instance, it is commonly explained that some Companions of the Prophet used to attend the initial part of the Prophet's meetings and would miss the latter part, while others came late, hearing only the last of what the Prophet was

[43] Ḥadīth Encyclopedia CD-ROM, *Bukhārī* #481 and *Muslim* #795.
[44] al-Zarkashī, 30-36.
[45] Ibid, 34-33.

saying.[46] Hence, ʿĀʾisha commented on the reports of many who misunderstood the narrative due to tardiness or premature departure. [47] With a distinctive rhetorical skill, she would tactfully analyze, criticize, correct, and debate in order to expose the weak points in any report she found offensive or otherwise incorrect.

Conclusion:

The Islamic tradition places a high priority on piety and the acquisition of knowledge for all Muslims. While men predominate as religious authorities, this has not altogether precluded women from gaining scholarly credentials and expertise. Women scholars have been involved in key areas of religious knowledge, including in exegesis, ḥadīth transmission, and the interpretation of religious law. In contemporary times in particular, women scholars are researching and interpreting the Qurʾān and sunna, and they are elevating the quality of the discourse, in particular by bringing to attention issues that previous scholars have not addressed to satisfaction. Many of these women scholars are also involved in building Muslim communities and in striving to establish a balanced and peaceful societies that live up to the Qurʾānic expectation of a community which strives for justice and "the middle way" (Q. 2:143).

Inspired by the teachings of the Qurʾān, and with determination to understand and preserve the guidance of the Prophet, contemporary Muslim women scholars are mitigating gender-bias and providing a more holistic and accurate rendition of Islamic knowledge which has as its foundations in the Qurʾān, in the authentic sunna, and in the unity of man and woman (e.g. Q. 4:1 and 49:13). The field of Muslim theology offers new possibilities for women to advance in religious scholarship across domains of expertise. The voices of emerging Muslim

[46] Ibid., 103.
[47] Ibid.

theologians are more often than not geared to contemporary realities and seek to articulate ways in which the Islamic religion provides resources for addressing social challenges and individual needs. As epitomized by this volume, the field of Muslim women's scholarship draws upon tradition with a critical eye for elevating the status of women and the socially marginalized. As I have argued in particular, ʿĀʾisha's legacy and strategies for engagement provide inspiration for women scholars as they seek to contend with problematic aspects of their religious heritage. For contemporary women scholars, a foundational understanding of her methodology is vital to a reinvigoration and reformation of tradition.

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